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## **Mothers on display: lunchboxes, social class and moral accountability**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores middle class mothers' narratives on their daily routines of preparing lunchboxes for their children. In this study lunchboxes are understood as an artefact linking together discourses and practices of doing and displaying mothering, media and government discourses of feeding children and broader issues of care and surveillance in private and public settings. Drawing on semi-structured, photo elicitation interviews and a focus group discussion, this paper illuminates how mothers feel on display through the contents of their children's lunchboxes.

**Key words:** display, family, food, gender, lunchboxes, moral accountability mothering, social class.

### **Introduction**

*You know I've spent two years being P.C. about parents. It's kind of time now, to say, you know, if you're giving, you know, very young kids, bottles and bottles of fizzy drinks, you're a fucking arsehole! You're a tosser! If you're giving them bags of fucking shitty sweets, you know, at that very young age, you're an idiot, why are you doing that? If you never cook'em a hot meal, you know, sort it out! Do it once a week, please!*

Jamie's Return to School Dinners, C4, 2006.

Jamie Oliver, the British celebrity Chef quoted above, has been featured in a number of TV series attempting to reform the Nation's eating habits. In 2005 a four-episode documentary series was broadcast by the television channel *Channel 4* in the United Kingdom titled *Jamie's School Dinners*. Here, the celebrity chef successfully made the case for improving the quality of school dinners, with media coverage highlighting the potential for his scheme to be undermined by mothers at a school in Rotherham, Yorkshire, England passing "fast food" to their children through the school gates (Hollows and Jones, 2010). While the public consensus seems to be that 'at least he's doing something', such initiatives can be seen as a problematic in a number of ways (Hollows and Jones, 2010:313). From our perspective, one of the key problems was that parents' perspectives were given very little genuine coverage or exploration. These voices have been generally absent from a media debate about school food mostly dominated by male politicians and celebrity chefs. Yet feeding children is an everyday activity suffused with moral discourses of 'good' and 'bad' parenting, with such judgements falling more heavily on mothers. In this paper we examine how moral accountability and notions of 'good mothering' are visible through the mundane and everyday object of children's packed lunches.

With 54% of children in primary schools (ages 4-11) in England consuming a packed lunch in 2011-12 (Nelson et al., 2012), it has been argued that lunchboxes are failing children in terms of their nutritional content. Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent, owners the food chain Leon, advised in their School Food Plan that:

*Many parents mistakenly imagine that a packed lunch is the healthiest option. In fact, it is far easier to get the necessary nutrients into a cooked meal – even one of mediocre quality. Only 1% of packed lunches meet the nutritional standards that currently apply to school food (Dimbleby and Vincent, 2013:7).*

Such concerns resulted in calls from some Head Teachers for packed lunches to be banned (BBC News, 12.09.13), followed by the introduction of legislation to make free school meals available to all children aged 5-7 in state schools in England (Section 106 of the Children and Families Act 2014). Such developments are linked to wider concerns about children's rising level of obesity and the National Health Service (NHS) expenditures for treating obesity related diseases (Pike and Leahy, 2012). These moral discourses have also been reflected in tabloid reports that children were arriving at school hungry and unable to concentrate (The Mirror 13/09/13).

Research studies looking at children's lunchboxes highlight how they are "a container for various aspects of the private and the public" (Metcalf et al. 2008: 403). The focus of such articles includes the politicized school initiatives of enforcing government healthy eating (Karrebaek 2012), the pervasiveness of brands in teens' lunchboxes (Roper and La Niece, 2009) and the practices of eating lunch box food at school (Daniel and Gustafsson, 2010). Although these studies provide useful insights

into the complexity of discourses and practices surrounding the preparation and consumption of lunchboxes, we are left with little understanding of mothers' everyday experiences of preparing lunchboxes for their children. Exceptions are the works of Allison (1991), Morrison (1996) and Donner (2006) analysing mothers' experiences of making lunchboxes for their children. Allison's (1991) study on lunchboxes in Japan shows how preparing a lunch considered nutritious and appealing by the school teachers was a way of displaying good mothering to the school. Similarly Morrison (1996) shows how mothers in the UK negotiate their norms of good mothering through school regulations and sanctions concerning what constitutes a 'proper' packed lunch. Donner's (2006) study of middle class mothers in Calcutta shows how preparing lunchboxes is one of the major preoccupations of mothers who sometimes challenge school regulations concerning 'proper' lunches by applying domestic norms of a meal to the school setting. Despite being conducted in different countries and at different times, these studies highlight how lunchboxes are connected to cultural order and ideological meanings, such as 'good' mothering. Indeed, women are judged as good mothers in terms of their culinary skills, health knowledge and ability to make a nutritional and aesthetically appealing lunchbox for their child.

### **Family Display and Moral Accountability**

The recent literature on mothering highlights how presenting oneself as a good mother is not simply a matter of *being* but rather of *doing*. This involves enacting contextualised norms of motherhood through practices, including all practices surrounding the work of feeding the family (see for example Moisio et al. 2004; Bugge and Almås 2006; O'Donohoe et al. 2013). Furthermore, sociologists have

highlighted how doing motherhood is also a matter of *display* (Finch, 2007; James and Curtis 2010; Dermott and Seymour, 2011). Family display is understood as “the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute ‘doing family things’ and thereby confirm that these relationships are ‘family’ relationships” (Finch, 2007:67). Further conceptualisations of display highlight how the concept hides a strong normative aspect of family life and mothering, since through objects, social interactions and narratives, people communicate to each other and to external audiences (imagined or real) that their family relationships adhere to prevailing social norms (James and Curtis 2010; Almack 2011; Gabb 2011; Heaphy 2011). However, being on display also risks being judged as troublesome or as an illegitimate form of family, in the case of differing from prevailing social norms (Gabb 2011; Heaphy 2011) replicating the ideological dominance of white, middle class, heterosexual nuclear family settings (see Skeggs 2004). Empirical work has focused on diverse family types, including lesbian couples whose work of displaying motherhood is intensified at certain points in time, such as during pregnancy (Ryan-Flood 2011). Such display work can be seen as a strategy orientated towards gaining recognition of being a family (Ryan-Flood 2011:121) and overcoming the uncertainties “for families whose contours are not easily recognised” (Almack 2011:117). In contrast, it has been argued that women in more conventional family settings such as the heterosexual nuclear family already have official recognition of being a family and therefore “have less need to ‘display’” (Ryan-Flood 2011:121). Other writers have highlighted the importance of understanding the role of the context wherein display takes place (Kehily and Thomson 2001; Short 2011). For example, Kehily and Thomson (2011) show how first time mothers’ narratives of motherhood are

delineated by well-established social norms of “proper” middle class mothering in the UK.

In line with the trend in recent studies of looking at motherhood as connected with display, we explore participants’ own accounts of motherhood as they emerged from their tales of making of children’s lunchboxes. Discourses and practices of everyday mothering are ‘delineated by strong social norms’ (May 2008:471) which Goffman (1971: 124) defines as ‘guide(s) for action’ supported by social rewards in case of compliance, or sanctions in case of infraction. As the existing literature shows, mothers’ accounts are indeed moral ones (McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2000; Miller 2005; May 2008). This implies that mothers’ accounts are likely to draw on existing expectations that the role of motherhood carries in specific contexts, and in relation to a specific audience (Kehily and Thomson 2011). The idea of moral accountability draws on the work of Goffman (1971) to argue that research participants are telling ‘moral tales’, that is ‘establishing and defending themselves as having morally acceptable identities in their interview accounts’ (McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2000: 786). Norms of ‘good motherhood’ include mothers’ self-sacrifice (Miller 1998; DeVault 1991) and ‘a *non-negotiable* obligation to put children’s needs first’ (McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2000:791). Interestingly, this obligation to put children first appears to fall more heavily on mothers than fathers (Miller, 2005), despite many changes in family life and women’s roles, such as more women being in paid employment.

In looking at how participants represent themselves in relation to the current norms of mothering in the UK context, we take into consideration the dominant discourses of ‘proper motherhood’ in our context of study. In particular, the current concerns about eating habits are strongly linked to notions of social class and in particular to

the type of subjects seen as socially valuable (Lupton 1996; Skeggs 2004; 2005). Studies looking at social class and food consumption show how middle class taste is associated with the display of wider gastronomic knowledge, consumption of 'exotic' food, and prioritising self-discipline (Lupton 1996; Warde and Martens 2000). It has been suggested that middle class parents tend to promote health and nutrition related to future-orientated concerns, whereas working class parents have a more functional relationship with food (Wills et al 2011: 738). Also middle class taste is associated with disregarding and avoiding food associated with lower social class (Donner 2006). Our paper focuses on the different discourses at play within the discussion of lunchboxes including being a good (middle class) mother; negotiating home food in school and responding to children's requests.

## **Research methods**

This study draws on photo-elicitation interviews with eleven mothers recruited from a primary school in Surrey, England. Mothers with children aged between nine and eleven years old were targeted since children at this stage have well established food preferences and can negotiate their choices with adults (Roberts and Pettigrew, 2013).

Fieldwork was conducted between January and March 2013. Mothers were recruited via an e-mail sent out to all parents with children aged nine to eleven at one school (n=180). The research participants were all white British, aged between 39 and 50 and all were in paid employment, either on a full or part time basis. In terms of family form, ten mothers were married and one mother was a (widowed) lone parent. The sample was relatively affluent, generally with a household income greater than £50,000 and the majority were owner-occupiers. All participants self-



identified as middle class, mainly in terms of their cultural and economic capitals, described in the forms of holidays, hobbies, family activities, salaries and house ownership. The middle class nature of the sample was not an intentional feature of the study design; our initial aim was to recruit parents from a diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The class bias is likely to be related in part to the geographical area where the study was conducted (a prosperous area in South East England) as well as self-selecting characteristics concerning parents who are happy to volunteer for such studies<sup>i</sup>. Given the small numbers of participants and the homogeneity of our sample, our analysis does not have any ambitions to claim generalisable findings, but it has the more modest aim of providing 'a more in depth analysis of the life stories expressed by a relatively small number of participants' (Thompson, 1996, p. 392).

The methodological design involved two interviews and a focus group discussion. The first interview provided an introduction to the family, how food was managed within the household, responsibility for preparing lunchboxes, how their content was decided, and guidance given from the school and other sources. Mothers were then given a disposable camera and asked to take photographs of lunchboxes prepared during one week. The second interview (which took place approximately three weeks after the first) asked mothers to discuss the photographs taken and provided an opportunity for the researchers to follow up questions emerging from the first interview. Finally, a focus group enabled parents to discuss lunchboxes in a group setting. This was considered valuable because we wanted to provide an opportunity for interaction between parents with potentially different viewpoints, although very similar perspectives were noted when the focus group took place. Seven participants

(who had also taken part in interviews) attended the focus group discussion. Although the focus group data helped to inform our analysis, quotations used in this paper have been drawn from the first and second interviews as they provide more in-depth insight into individual perspectives.

Interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis using thematic coding began after the first interview and was ongoing throughout the study. The analysis focused on mothers' perspectives and following Gabb's (2011) suggestion, we used the concept of family display as a sensitising concept in our analysis. First, we elaborate on the rationale parents gave for providing children with a packed lunch as opposed to school dinners.

### **Mum knows best: The decision to provide a packed lunch**

Opting for a lunch box rather than a school meal was framed as a matter of parental care, which takes the form of providing food that satisfies children's taste and preferences as well as parents' own understandings of what constitutes a "proper" lunch. This contrasts with the portrayal of mothers in Jamie's Return to School Dinners, (C4, 2006) where packed lunches were equated with lack of caring. Some mothers in the present study highlighted how they viewed meals provided by the school as unable to accommodate children's desires and satisfy their hunger. For example, Denise explains that:

*For a growing boy who plays rugby and does swimming, it is not enough food. We prefer... school dinners were so small and especially Jack was coming out saying, "I am hungry," or whatever else. Or Alice will come out and say, "I did not like that", so she wouldn't eat enough. So we thought, "Right, okay." But we know how much they will eat (Denise, second interview).*

Although results from the School Food Plan (Dimbleby and Vincent, 2013) highlight how the perceived high cost of school meals is a key factor for opting for a packed lunch, our participants did not generally seem to be concerned about the price of the lunch but rather focused on their quality. Considering the middle class nature of our sample, providing a lunchbox was framed as a way of feeding the children with home food, which is considered “better” than school food. “Better” was not simply a question of the nutritional or material quality of the food, but rather a way of providing the child with his/her own food, made especially for his/her own desires, requests, but also dietary restrictions and allergies. In this respect lunchboxes are a continuation home food away from home, or as others have pointed out, lunchboxes can be seen as “a bridge between home and school” (Metcalf et al. 2008: 408).

The photographs generated by mothers as part of the research showed lunchboxes prepared on kitchen counters among the ingredients of daily living: bottles of Calpol (children’s medicine), cookbooks, spices, recipe cards from supermarkets, chopping boards, blenders bottle of wine, and other cooking equipment not necessarily being used for lunchbox preparation. Mothers talked about lunchboxes as one task among many to be accomplished on a conveyor belt of activity. For example, Paula said of preparing lunchboxes:

*It’s just there. It’s just got to be done. It would be much easier for me if I didn’t have to do it, because it would be one less thing to have to do. But it has to be done, so you just get on with it (Paula, first interview).*

Despite mothers highlighting how their lunchboxes were individually crafted for accommodating children’s requests and/or controlling their diets, their understandings of a “proper” lunchbox were remarkably similar. Indeed the structure

of the analysed lunchboxes echoes the standard structure of adults packed lunch and consists of a drink, usually a fruit juice, a savoury element, often a sandwich, wrap, bagel or pasta, a piece of fruit and/or some raw vegetables, and a packet of crisps and/or a sweet such as a biscuit often described as a “treat” (see Image A and image B). If such content has been highly criticised for its poor nutritional quality (Dimbleby and Vincent, 2013) sociologists (Murcott 1982) have pointed out how the structure of the packed lunch is part of the cosmology of the meal system in Britain and as such it is “balanced culturally rather than nutritionally” (Metcalf et al. 2008: 405).

As will be shown in the following sections, our findings confirm how lunchboxes are cultural artefacts influenced by classed notions of good mothering which reflect a tension between convenient and handmade food (Moisio et al. 2004). Such discourses are entangled at the micro level in the everyday, mundane and routinized practices of selecting a specific brand, opting for new products and avoiding some food items. These discourses, often perpetuated through national campaigns, advertising, culinary TV programs with celebrity chefs as well as local and school initiatives are so imbedded in participants’ everyday life that they become part of their own vocabulary. For example in describing the content of her daughter’s lunchbox Heidi referred to the 5 a day health campaign<sup>ii</sup>, which she employed as a reference for explaining the number of fruit and vegetables she gives to her daughter during a day.:

*So I just want to encourage her to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. I think they add a bit of colour as well. [...] So I think if I can encourage her to eat a good lunch, then if she snacks through the evening then she’s had a good proportion... She’s very good. She’ll come home, if she hasn’t had a banana, she’ll*

*have a banana. She knows now, I think it's got through, that she needs to make sure she has these five portions a day, as well as all the other stuff (Heidi, second interview).*

Echoing the findings from previous studies (Parsons 2014), the mothers in this research generally appeared to embrace the healthy eating guidelines and were keen to demonstrate their own healthy eating and cooking knowledge.

### **Being a good (middle class) mother**

Being a 'good mother' invokes discourses of care for others without begrudging the effort and work incurred. This work of crafting lunchboxes was particularly evident in household where siblings are provided of different lunchboxes reflecting their different tastes and desires. Illustrating this, Hannah explained:

*Today they've had chicken wraps with – one doesn't like salad, so she didn't have any salad in hers, but Lucy did. Katie will probably have a sandwich tomorrow [...] Katie likes sausage rolls, and she likes scotch eggs, and those sorts of savoury things as well. Lucy possibly would have a sausage roll. I don't know. She'd have to be really in the mood. [...] Katie will, but Lucy won't eat things like yoghurt or anything like that either (Hannah, second interview).*

Linked to the idea of care through food, a number of mothers articulated a desire to avoid processed and pre-packaged foods. For example, Mary said:

*I think a good lunch, for me, seeing what's available in the supermarkets, is where you get the ingredients yourself and you actually make the packed lunch yourself because then you know what's actually going into it. Once you start going into*

*buying packs of processed things, it's hard to watch what they're actually eating (Mary, first interview).*

This concern to provide and encourage children to eat 'healthy food' was shown to be related to a classed notion of 'good mothering'. This is not to imply that working class mothers do not seek to provide healthy food for their children. Rather, we argue that the way that mothers in our predominantly middle class sample discussed lunchboxes, class became an important social division that was alluded to within their narratives. For example, in her interview Olivia spoke about recent media reports about children going to school with cold fish fingers in their lunchboxes. She explained:

*I think what they're highlighting when they're saying that is that people – it's the socioeconomic...people can't afford to make the packed lunches, to buy the stuff for the packed lunches. But, if they're in that much of a dire strait, then they're entitled to free school dinners.*

In describing the content of her own children's lunchboxes, Olivia referred to some convenient items that she will not include, since they symbolise bad mothering. Arguably all food purchased in supermarket and in shops (including fresh vegetables for making a soup) is mass produced, and manufactured, but Olivia seemed to imply that convenient food items that do not require any work for their consumption are a sign of an uncaring mother:

*A lot of it is laziness. I can remember the lady that was my nanny saying to me one day she had a child come into nursery, when she worked at a nursery, with a packet of cheese slices in her lunch box. Well, what do you do with that? And another child that used to come in every day with two packets of – what are the little cheese*

*biscuits called, the little round orange things? Do you know what I mean? There's got to be a huge element of, "I can't be bothered." Okay, maybe the child is fussy. But you're not going to make the child eat, and help the child to eat, by just giving it cheese biscuits. [...] They don't understand the nutrition. So you've got a packet of crisps full of e-numbers, a chocolate biscuit, and it actually probably costs more than my jar of leek and potato soup (Olivia, second interview).*

Although the 'they' referred to in this narrative is not fully unpacked, it seems to focus on mothers who are from a lower social class than Olivia and who do not share her education about food. Mothers who give their children junk food became a powerful image that mothers worked to distance themselves from, by embracing the school and government guidelines and displaying a concern for healthy eating, fresh produce and home cooking rather than relying on pre-packaged convenience products. Olivia continued:

*There was that awful thing in Rotherham with Jamie Oliver, with the woman who was shoving hamburgers and chips through the school railings. Why? The thought of doing that wouldn't even enter my psyche (Olivia, second interview)*

In one of the pictures Olivia took as part of the research [Image C], Jamie Oliver's book 'Ministry of Food' book was positioned behind the lunchbox, almost as if the Celebrity Chef himself is towering over its contents, with the words 'Fruit & Veg' visible on the cutting board at the bottom. On the right hand side we can see a glass jar of home-made sour dough which was not part of the lunchbox but appeared in the picture. The inclusion of these items could have happened by chance, or they could be read as an attempt to symbolically demonstrate to the interviewer that

Olivia should be seen differently to the 'problematic' mothers featuring in her narratives.

Although Olivia was the respondent for whom class appeared to be the most salient within her narrative, others also made a connection between lunchbox food and social class. Through the narratives developed in the interview setting mothers suggested themselves to be more relaxed regarding food for their children in private familial settings than that consumed in the public world of lunchboxes and children's parties. This suggests a fear of being labelled a bad mother on the grounds of not providing the healthy diet promoted by public health campaigns and celebrity chefs. For example, Mary talked about her daughter's interest in healthy eating and attributed this to peer group influence as well as changing and class-related social attitudes to fast food. She said:

*I can't imagine the kind of response you would get if you were to have a McDonald's party. People would just be horrified that you would expose their child to that. I guess it's a bit of a snob thing. The group they've been brought up in they wouldn't do that. I'm not saying we don't go to Burger King or McDonalds because we do. But if you were looking after someone else's child for instance you would never send them home having eaten something like that (Mary, second interview).*

Crucially, Mary suggests a difference between the food consumed in public (alongside other children) and that consumed in private (with their own family). Although providing only for one's own children, an important element highlighted here is the public nature of lunchbox consumption. Interestingly, lunchboxes were not a regular source of conversation or explicit 'showing and discussing' among mothers as contemporaries. Respondents said that lunchboxes were something that



had been spoken about more frequently when children were younger (for example when children were starting school) but less now that children were in the final two years of primary school. However, this is not to say that mothers were not interested in what other mothers were giving their children; they described finding out about them in a less direct manner – by asking their children about their friends' lunchboxes. This was a low stakes and less exposing way to get information about what other parents are doing. Implicit in this activity is the possibility that their own practices may be reported back to other parents. Mothers' narratives also alluded to the anxiety of "keeping up with new trends". For example, Jane explained:

*The friend I was out with today, she had lunch, she was saying she'd just bought a flask. Some sort of thermos flask but a food thermos flask to keep pasta warm in it. I think I'll probably investigate that actually to keep stuff warm.* (Jane, first interview)

## **2) Negotiating Home Food in School**

Given that government health campaigns on healthy eating are partly administered through the school and its staff (see Daniel and Gustafsson, 2010), 'the school' was an important potential audience within mothers' narratives. The school through which research participants were recruited had rules concerning what should not be included in lunchboxes, including fizzy drinks, solid chocolate, sweets and nuts. However, a process of interpretation was also required, for example, is a home-made cupcake considered a sweet? Surveillance took place through lunchbox checks, the results of which were reported back by children. Illustrating this, Heidi explained:

*Milly will come home and say, "Oh they did a lunchbox check. So and so had this great big chocolate and we are not allowed that." She was worried her cake bar*

*wouldn't be allowed. But because it is not solid chocolate...I mean they are only little as well. I find it quite hard sometimes because I think if you make their lunchboxes then you are happy for them to eat it (Heidi, first interview).*

Our respondents generally agreed with the restrictions placed by the school, which fits with existing research findings concerning middle class families and compliance with dominant discourses of health and nutrition (Wills et al., 2011; Parsons, 2014). These guidelines were believed to be important for children's future physical health and cultural capital (Wills et al., 2011). Potential judgement could result if parents provided food items that were not allowed. Mothers' narratives alluded to a concern that packing a 'bad' lunchbox could be seen to imply that one was a 'bad' (or less caring) mother. Illustrating this, Mary explained:

*I wouldn't want the school to think, "Oh my God," like, "David's mum has just spent two seconds packing this. Or it to look specifically like he's packed it himself, in terms of the content [...] I think there is an element thereof, "I don't want to be judged, on the basis that my kid's got inappropriate food regularly, on a regular basis. Because you want people to think you're at least a good parent or trying your best anyway (Mary, first interview).*

Supporting previous research findings, this implies that some mothers such as Mary were aware that the school requires a specific performance of motherhood (Allison, 1991; Morrison 1996; Donner 2006). However, it is also important to note that there was some variation about mothers' practices and there were some examples of mothers knowingly contravening the school guidance. This is illustrated by Kerry who works full time:

*I have, on occasion when I haven't been shopping and I haven't had anything in and I have had to give a bag of crisps in the lunch box, just to make sure they've had enough to eat. [Kerry's son] did come home and say, "I'm not supposed to have crisps". Yes, he'd been told from the school. I knew he wasn't allowed to have them, but it was weighing up the option of I don't have time now, I need to get to work, I don't have anything in...I don't want him to be hungry, so a bag of crisps in (Kerry, first interview).*

In this example, an ethic of care (the need to ensure her son had enough to eat) was presented as justification for less than complete adherence to the school rules. Kerry described how she was able to psychologically distance herself from the criticism, saying: 'I kind of ignored it and said, "Don't worry about it."' This suggests that even when transgressing the ideal of healthy food cooked from scratch, Kerry could still draw upon a form of moral accountability to argue that she was still putting her son's needs first. As well as putting children's needs first, another salient aspect of good mothering invoked by the mothers was responding to children's needs and desires.

### **3) Responding to Children's Requests**

Mothers described their children as an audience demanding the inclusion of specific food in the lunchbox. It appears that children did not contest the overall structure or content of the lunchbox but sometimes advanced specific requests of new foods, which parents described as "treats", mostly sweet food items that do not constitute the main element of the meal, but have a similar function as a dessert. If the main element of the lunchbox (a carbohydrates based item, usually a sandwich or wrap) remains under mother's control, the treat represents a space of negotiation between mothers and knowledgeable children, usually up to date with the new products and

brands available in the market. Children's requests can be linked to peer influence and advertising. For example, Sophie explained how her daughters would make such requests:

*Sometimes they'll come home and say, "So-and-so has something in their lunch box, can I have that"? Or you'll go out shopping and the little one will see something and say, "So-and-so has that", or look specifically. Then there's all the new things, like the fruit strings and the fruit winders and all that stuff that wasn't available two or three years ago...(Sophie, first interview).*

Recognised as competent consumers able to advance requests for the content of their lunchboxes, mothers responded to children's requests evoking the principle of "moderation" or "balance". Although participants had varied opinions as to what constitutes a moderate amount of treats, all seemed to consider the treat in relation to the overall content of the lunchbox as well as the rest of food to be eaten during the other meals of the day:

*Everything in moderation I think. So that is what I'm trying to give to her. [...] I have said to her, "You know you need to eat as many [vegetables] as you can. So once you've had that, then yes, then you can have your treats on top." I think she understands (Heidi, second interview).*

Treats have the function of rewarding children for being committed students engaged in school and sports activities as well as having eaten the healthy food items. As such, they can still fit within discourses of moral accountability and good mothering, despite containing potentially unhealthy items. This supports previous works highlighting how food choices are often made as a compromise between indulgence and health (Warde 1997). Also this echoes previous works on mothering highlighting

how the work of caring is a compromise between providing food considered healthy as well as food that children will enjoy (authors' own forthcoming). This tension was well summarised by Heidi affirming that: "Well sometimes you can't keep them happy, because you've got to keep them healthy".

In providing food that children will enjoy, children's needs and desires concerning how they want to spend their lunchtime were also relevant. For example, if they preferred to play outside with friends or take part in sport that would lead to less time to eat a packed lunch and mothers needed to pack the contents with this in mind (Harman and Cappellini, forthcoming). Illustrating this, Hannah said:

*Sometimes they'll say to me, "Oh, mummy, just put three things in there, because I haven't got time." That's another thing with school lunches, that it's a bit of a conveyor belt, and they're rushed. So I know if they've got a club or something at lunchtime, maybe one or two things get left. (Hannah, second interview)*

Aware of the short amount of time for eating lunch, Hannah needed to select food that at the same time is filling, appealing and can be eaten quickly. Her lunchbox therefore displays evidence of her maternal knowledge of her children's preferences, pressures and activities. Daniel and Gustafsson (2010) evaluated the changes to school meals in three London primary schools and argue that 'healthy eating' initiatives have neglected 'the social significance of lunchtimes as 'children's spaces' within the adult controlled school day' (p.265). Schools have therefore been criticized for focusing on what children put in their mouths at the expense of creating a pleasurable social context where food is consumed (Daniel and Gustafsson, 2010). Relevant factors include where children eat, the time they have to eat, who they are eating with and the choice they have over this (e.g. whether they can choose to eat

with friends who have school dinners) and how eating lunch is fitted in among other activities (which may include queuing, talking to friends, playing). It can be argued that mothers' narratives showed an awareness of the social context to children's lunches and are displaying this to others and themselves, reinforcing a sense of 'good mothering' that goes beyond purely nutritional concerns.

## **Discussion**

Participants saw their everyday preparation of lunchbox as one of their mundane, routinized and taken for granted practices surrounding mother's identity of providing not simply food, but "food that will satisfy them [the family]" (DeVault 1991:40). The care mothers took in customising lunchboxes in relation to the child's preferences, moods and dietary restrictions as well as school activities and regulations, shows how lunchboxes are understood not simply as a way of providing food for children, but also as a way of providing home food fitting the school environment. Finch (2007) emphasised that the core message of display is 'These are my family relationships, and they work'. Our findings suggest that mothers were displaying, to *themselves* as well as external audiences (such as school teachers and lunchtime supervisors, the researchers) that they are competent, caring mothers. This takes place against an interesting backdrop. Miller (2005) notes that women's experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and early mothering in the West is shaped by 'hierarchical forms of authoritative knowledge' where professional expertise is most highly valued (Miller, 2005:150). Although the mothers in the present study have children aged 9-11 and could then be expected to be more confident in their role as experts in their children's lives than those with younger children, the research was conducted within

a wider context where mothers' authority and knowledge could be seen as under attack within media and policy discourses (see the introduction to this paper). Displayed and consumed in the school setting, mothers are *on display* through their lunchboxes and accountable to others. Thus family display operates not only on extraordinary family occasions and celebrations, but also on a daily basis in our routinized and ordinary practices such as making the shopping lists for the week, looking at the new arrivals in supermarkets and indeed preparing a lunchbox.

The findings also illuminate the crucial role of the perceived audience in the process of display. Mothers navigate different requests vocalised by their children, other mothers' accounts of their domestic lives, and also those visible in the supermarkets shelves, TV programs and cookbooks, and school regulations. Interestingly, the role of fathers seem to be virtually absent in mothers' narratives and this seemed to be linked to the way in which children's lunchbox preparation was still seen as 'women's work'. This echoes previous research which has highlighted the gendered nature of parenting in the West (DeVault 1991; Miller 1998; Miller, 2005; O'Donohoe et al. 2013).

The school seems to be regarded as one of the most powerful potential audiences to whom mothers felt morally accountable. Although there were some examples of resistance to the school regulations, we found that overall mothers followed school guidance. This could be explained by the fact that these mothers do not want to position themselves (either in their everyday lives or in their interviews) as problematic mothers who do not know how to feed their children 'properly'. Relatedly, Miller's (2005) study of early motherhood highlighted the way in which notions of motherhood are 'culturally shaped and morally grounded' and that this 'may lead to self-silencing' (p.13) because the repertoires of what it is possible to say

about motherhood appears limited. This is likely to have affected the way mothers in the current study presented their narratives.

As well as reflecting gendered assumptions, the notion of feeding the child with ‘proper food’ was also framed in relation to social class; being a middle class mother able to make ‘proper’ dietary choices for her children. Discourses and practices around the everyday work of feeding their children are embedded in wider discourses of “producing” and “marking” social class (Skeggs 2004, 2005), as well as marking mothering. As Skeggs (2005) has shown, class is related to hierarchical attributions of value. In food consumption as well as other areas, middle class lifestyles are presented as the ideal to follow (Wills et al. 2011). Furthermore, as previous research has found, ‘the making of ethical selves is a relational classed process’ (Perrier, 2013: 667). Certain gendered and classed bodies are considered as deviant and pathologised through moral discourses perpetuating class distinction (Skeggs, 2005). Indeed moralising discourses around healthy eating and the look and shape of the body are rooted in gendered and classed discourses wherein the most socially valuable subjects are positioned as white, thin, affluent and healthy ones (ibid). In relation to school food, working class women are constituted through media and governmental discourse as lacking in taste, education and morality (Pike and Leahy 2012). As reflected in some of the narratives presented in this paper, this picture of deficit is constructed in opposition to the normative position of middle class motherhood. Whereas the existing literature highlights the particular importance of displaying family in less traditional contexts (for example see Ryan-Flood 2011; Almack 2011), our data suggests that more attention could be paid to the everyday display work performed by mothers in relatively hegemonic positions.



Although the size of the sample of this paper is limited and caution should be exercised in extrapolating from the findings, one of the striking things about data presented here is that it suggests that middle class, heterosexual women mainly in nuclear families (who arguably may be less demonised than other mothers) still feel compelled to do a lot of everyday work to display 'good' mothering. Even amongst relatively privileged mothers, there was a certain uncertainty of being able to display good mothering. This can be noticed in mothers' fear of 'losing the plot'- as one of the participants said- and their activity of subtly monitoring and keeping up-to-date with what other mothers do and make for their children (e.g. at the time of our fieldwork mothers were particularly passionate about introducing thermo flasks in their children's lunchboxes). These feelings of uncertainty highlight how the process of doing and displaying middle class motherhood is an on-going process, never completely accomplished by mothers who need to learn how the display of being middle class evolves in the marketplace. Our findings confirm Skeggs' argument that 'class is not a given but is in continual production' (2004:3). Indeed our findings show how a classed display of motherhood is a moving target never fully achieved by mothers, since their work of display requires them to keep updated with changing and contrasting demands of mothering proposed by relevant audiences. In this respect media and marketplace discourses epitomised by celebrity chef programmes, and the constant introduction of new products and brands seem to exacerbate the process of good mothering as a moving and a never fully achieved target.

This paper has built upon Finch's (2007) concept of family display by illuminating how, through the preparation of lunchboxes, middle class mothers engage in mundane and routine processes of display with reference to different audiences. Our

findings point to some of the ways in which mothers try to maintain control and input into food provision outside of the home. In looking at participants' feelings surrounding their preparation of lunchboxes, our paper reveals a certain anxiety in the subject *on display*, who despite being part of a relatively hegemonic group of white middle class mothers, feel under scrutiny and potentially under attack.

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<sup>i</sup> Although we were not able to address the class bias in the present study due to limited time and resources, a subsequent (British Academy funded) study by the authors has successfully recruited parents from more diverse class and ethnic backgrounds via schools in London and Surrey.

<sup>ii</sup> Following World Health Organization guidelines, the Five a Day campaign was introduced in the UK by the Department of Health in 2002-03 to encourage people to consume at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.

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Image A



Image B



Image C



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